

# Teaching for Social Justice in Multicultural Urban Schools: Conceptualization and Classroom Implication



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Presumably, everyone shares the understanding that teaching for social justice means providing students with a supportive learning environment that is just, fair, democratic, and even compassionate. In reality, people are probably using this term to mean many things without actually embracing it as a perspective for educating students in urban school settings.

Is teaching for social justice a process of conveying a set of radical beliefs related to equity, diversity, and racial differences? Does it mean taking a political stand and becoming a change agent in diminishing the inequities in schools? Is it a virtue? Is it possessing certain abilities and knowing certain kinds of knowledge to do certain things in the classroom that reflect equality?

In this article, I examine the different definitions and conceptualizations offered by a number of educator-researchers on teaching and learning for social justice and identify the common principles that are applicable, relevant, and translatable into classroom practice. I then offer

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a personal perspective on how the notion of teaching for social justice can develop, evolve, and become part of an ideological and political commitment for educational advocacy and activism.

## A Glimpse of Urban School Reality

One has to be aware of the demographic situation in urban areas and the social reality of isolation and poverty faced by its residents to make the connection how these conditions affect urban schools and why there is a need to teach for social justice in an attempt to raise the students' identity, provide equitable access to appropriate curriculum and instruction, and remedy any existing harmful inequities.

Jean Anyon (1997) documented that most residents of large urban areas across the United States are African American or Latino. They can be found in New York (57%), Chicago (62%), Los Angeles (63%), Atlanta (70%), Detroit (79%), and Miami (88%). More than half African American, Latino, and Asian reside in the cities of Baltimore, Cleveland, El Paso, Memphis, San Antonio, San Francisco, San Jose, and Washington, D.C. The relatively poorer urban residents who mostly belong to minority populations are isolated from the economic mainstream of

middle class jobs and not provided adequate social services because of the impoverished situations of many city governments.

Urban schools are directly affected by the overall political and economic conditions in urban areas and provide what Anyon termed "ghetto schooling" to its diverse student population (Anyon, 1997). Kozol (2005) described the "savage inequities" in inner-city schools further by reporting that nowadays scripted rote-and-drill drill curricula, prepackaged lessons, standard-naming and numbering rituals, display of standards in bulletin boards, rewards and sanctions, and other forms of control on every intellectual activity are prevalent. He also observed that "the more experienced instructors teach the children of the privileged and the least experienced are sent to teach the children of minorities" (p. 275).

Kozol cited Gary Orfield and his colleagues at the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University who reported that "almost three-fourths of Black and Latino students attend schools that are predominantly minority... attend schools which we call apartheid schools (in which 99% to 100% of students are nonwhite). Kozol (2005) concluded that "these are confessions of apartheid, and no matter by what arguments of urgency or practicality they have



been justified, they cannot fail to further deepen the divisions of society" (p. 275).

Kincheloe (2004) asserted that "urban education is always in crisis—yesterday, today, and certainly in the near future" and that we need to develop a powerful urban pedagogy and a rigorous urban education. In an essay "What Is Urban Education in an Age of Standardization and Scripted Learning?" Hill (2004) writes:

Urban, we know, is the environment of a city: a complex hub of human endeavor, a place of dense population of diverse peoples, an important location for financial and governmental affairs, and a rich center of cultural imagination and artistic creation. Urban environments are some of the most contradictory areas of our world, where the extremes of our civilization coexist—the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor, the most privileged and the most disenfranchised, live and work here in large concentrations. (p. 119)

In summary, urban schools serve a big, complex, and diverse group of students in areas marked by profound socioeconomic disparity, ethnic diversity, and higher immigrant populations. Inner-city schools are also more susceptible to educational mandates and sanctions, usually called "reforms," that are monitored carefully for their strict adherence to regulated curricula, technical standards, standardized evaluations, and high-stakes testing preparation and performance.

### **Educational Inequities in Urban Schools**

Clearly, "teaching for social justice" at this point sounds essential for all children in the increasingly diverse urban schools in the United States, where inequities seem to abound and where the majority are refugee students, English language learners, and students of color attend (Goldenberg, 2004; McBrien, 2005).

Rumberger and Gandara (2004) explained with thorough documentation the "seven inequitable conditions" existing in California schools that affect the opportunities of the English learners (ELs) to learn and contribute to the academic gap between them and their English-only counterparts: (1) inequitable access to appropriately trained teachers—25 percent of teachers of ELs were not fully certified and thus ELs are significantly less likely to have a fully credentialed teacher than other low-income non-EL peers; (2) inadequate professional development opportunities for teachers—very little support with only 7% to 10% of reported professional development time focused

on the instruction of ELs; (3) inequitable access to appropriate assessment—the only measures of achievement for ELs are tests administered in English with an exclusive reliance on an English-language norm-referenced achievement test for ELs; (4) inadequate instructional time—a great deal of instructional time is lost while ELs are in the structured English immersion program and waiting for their permanent classroom to be assigned, and classrooms with large numbers of ELs have fewer assistants in them to help; (5) inequitable access to instructional materials and curriculum—75% of the teachers surveyed said that they use the same textbooks for their ELs and English-only students with no materials adapted to their linguistic needs, and teachers with high percentages of ELs are less likely than teachers with low percentages of ELs to have access to appropriate textbooks and instructional materials; (6) inequitable access to adequate facilities—schools with a high concentration of ELs have overcrowded classrooms, poorer working conditions for teachers, less parental involvement, and more neighborhood crime; and (7) intense segregation into schools and classrooms that place them at high risk for educational failure—55% of all elementary-aged ELs in California are enrolled in schools with large concentrations of ELs, two-thirds of ELs attended classrooms in which more than 50% of their classmates were ELs, thus denying them the opportunity to interact with peers who could be English language models and who are achieving at high or even moderate levels.

As you can see from the reported educational inequities in California, that are consciously or unconsciously created and perpetuated, the English language learners are very far from receiving a just, equitable, and fair education in urban schools.

Similarly, McBrien (2005) explained that as children of refugees from usually war-torn countries settle in and attend high-poverty urban areas, they often end up in "a negative, subtractive assimilation pattern, rejecting their family and cultural ties in hopes of being accepted by American peers" (p. 355). Her research warned that "misunderstanding the dire situations of parents, the role of trauma in refugees' behaviors, cultural differences, and best practices in language acquisition has caused many school personnel to hold prejudiced attitudes that lead to discrimination" (p. 356).

In a related study, Lalas and Valle (2005) in a narrative inquiry described the set of inequities perceived by students of color in their school experiences in inner-

city schools. Their perceived inequities included interracial differences, racial segregation, racial violence, stereotyping, bullying, religious intolerance, gender segregation, unfair treatment, language barriers, cultural clash, drug and alcohol abuse, gangs, and low income. Lalas and Valle concluded that students' voices need to be heard so teachers can understand their students and "create a caring environment to pave the path for social justice."

While many more recent studies have supported the assertion that students in urban schools, indeed, face many challenges associated with race, ethnicity, and poverty (Haycock, Jerald, & Huang, 2001; Singham, 2003), many educational reforms have also been primarily initiated to improve the academic performance and achievement of inner-city students. Some of these reforms included joint-decision making among teachers and administrators, flexible scheduling, core planning in individual schools, teaming of teachers, integration of curriculum, class size reduction, parental involvement, new forms of assessment, corporate models, and many other research-based approaches.

However, Rothstein (2004) explained that school reforms alone including higher standards, better teachers, more accountability, better discipline, and other effective practices are not enough to overcome the effect of the "social-class characteristics" in widening the academic gap between White, middle class students and their minority and lower-class counterparts. I therefore suggest in this article that teachers and teacher educators must play key roles in the reform effort because reforms are, in the final analysis, classroom reforms that are directly in their hands and the inner-city students they interact with. But can teachers do it alone?

### **Teachers for Social Justice: Key to Classroom Reforms**

It has been well-documented and well-argued that educational reforms are mitigated by urban poverty and cannot transform inequities in schools without thinking about restructuring the "city environment itself, which produces these students and the failing schools" (Anyon, 1997, p. 13). In fact, Anyon (2005) showed that "job, wage, housing, tax, and transportation policies maintain minority poverty in urban neighborhoods, and thereby create environments that overwhelm the potential of educational policy to create systemic, sustained improvements in the schools" (p. 66).

However, classroom teachers are the

most essential element because they have the ultimate responsibility to navigate the curriculum and instruction with their students in the classroom. They can examine the impact of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and poverty itself on the educational outcomes of students in urban schools. They have the intellectual and critical capacity to analyze the purposes, practices, and policies of schools and the impact on students' life opportunities. They may not be able to transform the society's fundamental inequities, but they can contribute in many practical ways by raising the level of social awareness of their students and guiding the curriculum for social justice instruction.

It is imperative that both pre-service and in-service teachers be assisted and guided in developing their content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and advocacy for social justice to improve the overall education of their students in urban schools. However, Cochran-Smith (2004) asserted that there are multiple paths for pursuing the social justice agenda and she called for a broad participation of school- and university-based educators, including classroom teachers, teacher educators, and community advocates who are willing to "rethink beliefs and attitudes about difference, privilege, diversity, and culture" and work "together as teachers but also learners, and as educators but also activists" (p. 156).

### What Does It Really Mean To Teach for Social Justice?

Generally, educators may view teaching for social justice as a way of recognizing, respecting, and valuing differences in race, cultural beliefs, social norms, intellectual flexibility, and personal perspectives and dispositions among students in a typically multicultural classroom in urban schools. Many classroom teachers may believe that social justice can be cultivated in the classroom by appreciating diversity, promoting equity, advancing broad-mindedness, and encouraging voice and expression (Brooks & Thompson, 2005). Recently, urban school counselors relate an emphasis in social justice as an essential skill in assuming an advocacy role as part of their work and paying attention to social, political, and economic realities of students and families (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

According to Brown (2004), being administrators and leaders for social justice requires grounding in learning theories, transformative pedagogy, and critical discourse and reflection, and aims "to perceive social, political, and economic

contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."

Whatever lens is used in explaining the term, a compelling argument needs to be made for "the necessity of a social justice agenda in a democratic and increasingly diverse society" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 168). Some experts believe that it is quite ironic and a sad statement on the moral responsibility of our schools that one has to even advocate for teaching for social justice (Kohl, 2001; Shamsheer & Decker, 2004).

Teaching for social justice can be also defined as a set of beliefs that emphasizes equity, ethical values, justice, care, and respect (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Practically, it can also translate to making the necessary instructional adaptations for diverse and special needs students to remedy any problem in securing equitable access to instruction and assessment for them (Solomon, Lallas, & Franklin, 2006).

Others frame learning to teach for social justice as a lifelong undertaking that involves:

coming to understand oneself in relation to others; examining how society constructs privilege and inequality and how this affects one's own opportunities as well as those of different people; exploring the experiences of others and appreciating how those inform their worldviews, perspectives, and opportunities; and evaluating how schools and classrooms operate and can be structured to value diverse human experiences and to enable learning for all students. (Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 201)

As you can surmise from the definition she uses in working with her teacher candidates, Darling-Hammond (2005) suggests that teachers for social justice need to understand one's identity, other people's background and their worldviews, and the sources of inequities and privileges. Sensitivity to these issues will be helpful in facilitating the learning of students authentically and making a difference in the their lives.

Bell (1997) explains in an even more global and philosophical sense that teaching for social justice means providing all groups in a society full and equal participation in meeting their needs:

Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure...Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole. (p.1)

It is clear from Bell's conceptualization that teachers, both pre-service and in-service, who would like to practice social jus-

tice, need to understand that all individuals in the society must be responsible to each other and deserve to enjoy equity, security, safety, and involvement in their interaction and dealing with others and the society.

Cochran-Smith (2004) frames teaching for social justice as connected to teacher preparation when she asserts in her book that:

the conception of teaching and learning to teach that underlie the social justice agenda include learning to represent complex knowledge in accessible and culturally responsive ways, learning to ask good questions, use diversified forms of assessment to shape curriculum and instruction, develop relationships with students that support and sustain learning, work with—not against—parents and community members, collaborate with other professionals, interpret multiple data sources in support of pupils' learning, maintain high academic standards for students of all abilities and backgrounds, engage in classroom inquiry in the service of pupil and teacher learning, and join with others in larger movements for educational and social equity. (p. 159)

In this description of the "social justice agenda," Cochran-Smith outlines the knowledge, skills, abilities, and disposition that teachers need to develop to move this agenda forward, which include culturally responsive teaching, making content comprehensible and accessible, effective and purposeful questioning, use of different forms assessment to inform instruction, support for students, collaboration with parents, community members, and other professionals, knowing how to interpret data, maintaining high academic standards, being a teacher-researcher, and strong advocacy for equity.

Cochran-Smith (2000) also explains emphatically that teachers and teacher educators, to be effective, need "to struggle to unlearn racism itself" and understand that teaching does not require content knowledge and verbal ability alone in raising pupils' test scores and academic achievement. Teaching, from a social justice perspective, is not a matter simply of transmitting knowledge and equating pupil learning to higher scores on high-stakes tests, but rather engaging pupils in "developing critical habits of mind, understanding and sorting out multiple perspectives, and learning to participate in and contribute to a democratic society by developing both the skill and the inclination for civic engagement" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 159).

Aside from democratic citizenship and a focus on democracy, others suggest that teaching for social justice also includes "anti-oppression education" which highlights diversity in schools and proposes



different ways of confronting the inequities faced by students in urban multicultural environments (Brandes & Kelly, 2004).

Many classroom practitioners have also begun designing and implementing instruction that reflects social justice instruction and critical teaching through students' personal stories, use of literature, critical literacy as comprehension (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), "acting for justice" lessons (Christensen, 2001), thematic units (Beale, 2004), service learning (Lucas, 2005), cooperative learning (Sapon-Shevin, 2004), and other learning strategies across differences (Shor & Pari, 1999).

## Classroom Implications

In summary, the conceptualizations of teaching for social justice by several educator-researchers described in this article reveal some common principles that are relevant, appropriate, and translatable to classroom teaching. At this point, it is essential to understand that the teaching and learning processes that occur are facilitated by the on-going dynamic interaction of three major components—namely, the learner, teacher, and the classroom context, as clearly described in the sociocognitive interaction model of meaning construction in reading formulated by Ruddell and Unrau (2004). In this meaning-construction process, both the learner and the teacher use their life experiences, personal values and beliefs, personal and world knowledge, abilities to construct, monitor, and represent knowledge, and personal meaning construction and decision-making disposition in the instructional context of the classroom.

The classroom context where the interaction, generation, and negotiation of meaningful experiences happen is broadly defined here to include the physical classroom arrangement, classroom discipline, key sources of authority where meanings reside, textbooks, assessment instruments, assignments, and many other visual and supplementary materials. Thus, it is through the dynamic interchange of the learner, teacher, and classroom context that the following teaching and learning principles drawn from the teaching for social justice conceptualizations can be applied:

- (1) Understanding oneself in relation to other individual or group of individuals.
- (2) Appreciating diversity and promoting equity.
- (3) Recognizing inequities and how to diminish them.
- (4) Equitable participation and allocation of resources.

- (5) Creating a caring and culturally responsive learning environment.
- (6) Working together as a learning community.
- (7) Engagement in classroom inquiry.
- (8) Critical thinking and reflection.
- (9) Using varied forms of assessment for equitable and fair monitoring of student progress.

This list of common principles implies the significant roles that a classroom teacher and learner must play as he or she interacts, shares, negotiates, and generates knowledge in the classroom context. The infusion of these principles in the classroom occurs only when the teacher, the learner, and the classroom context are joined together as significant variables and consciously relied upon as meaningful and influential sources in the construction and acquisition of knowledge. The student and the teacher not only bring their own personal, social, cultural, economic, and political values from prior beliefs and experiences into the classroom, they also interpret the classroom culture and social life they find there.

As such, providing teaching and learning contexts to students in urban schools and preparing teachers to work in diverse classroom will continue to challenge preservice and in-service teachers and teacher educators because, as Cochran-Smith (2004) declares with authority, teacher education for social justice is a "learning problem" and a "political problem."

As she suggests, it is not just knowing a content area or body of knowledge, and possessing the pedagogical skills to deliver it, but it is also being reflective and critical as "part of community where the participants deliberately claim the role of educator as well as activist, based on ideological commitment to diminishing the inequities of American life" (p. 19).

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